

The confirmational marker *ha* in Northern Mandarin

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the form, distribution and function of the sentence-final particle *ha* (哈) in Northern Mandarin. To understand its function, we also compare *ha* with two other Mandarin particles: *ba* and the A-Not-A tags (*dui bu dui* and *shi bu shi*) in their confirmational use. The interpretation of these particles is highly context-dependent. We show that there are three distinct phonetic forms of *ha* and each of them has a different pragmatic function. *Ha*₁ is used for confirmation of the speaker's stance; *ha*₂ is used for confirmation of the addressee's stance; and *ha*₃ is a narrative marker. We develop an analysis according to which the two confirmational instances of *ha* modify the illocutionary act of an utterance. We also show that the choice among particles with seemingly identical function is determined by the strength of the speaker's stance toward the proposition as well as considerations of politeness.

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1. Introduction

The goal of this paper is to provide an in-depth description and analysis of Northern Mandarin (NM) *ha*, a sentence final particle (SFP), which is used to request confirmation. Consider the examples in (1). The bare declarative clause in (1)a is used as an assertion; the same sentence followed by *ha* is used as a request for confirmation (1)b.

- (1) a. *Nimen shi jiu dianzhong kai men de*
you:PL be nine o'clock open door NOM
'You opened at nine o'clock.'
- b. *Nimen shi jiu dianzhong kai men de ha?*
you:PL be nine o'clock open door NOM PRT
'You opened at nine o'clock, right?'

Abbreviations: NOM, nominalizer; PRT, particle; ASP, aspect; CL, classifier; BA, marker of the *ba* construction; PL, plural; DET, determiner; CSC, Complex stative construction (*de*).

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Ha is a particle extensively used in NM, especially in the Beijing Dialect, Tianjin Dialect and Northeast dialects spoken by more than 200 million people.¹ It is a pervasive particle: according to a survey conducted by He (1994), 57.3% of the native speakers of Beijing dialect use *ha* in their daily conversation. 79% of *ha* users are younger than 55 years old.

While Mandarin SFPs have been studied by various scholars (Li and Thompson, 1981; Hu, 1981, 1988; Sun, 1998; Chu and Chi, 1999; Wang, 2005; Li, 2006; Simpson, 2014; Deng, 2015; Yip and Rimmington, 2015; among others), NM *ha* has received less attention (but see He, 1994; Yin, 1999; Yuan, 2008; Su, 2008; Cui, 2009, 2011). Hence, one of the core goals of this paper is to contribute to the description of SFPs in Mandarin by looking at one of their dialectal variants. In addition, our description and analysis is couched in a way that makes cross-dialectal as well as cross-linguistic comparison of SFPs possible in that it identifies various factors which may vary independently of each other (Wiltschko and d’Arcy, 2015; Wiltschko and Heim, 2016; Lam, 2014). In particular, we systematically explore the form and distribution of *ha*, as well as its context of use. After briefly describing our methodology in Section 2, in Section 3, we introduce some core facts about *ha*, namely that it has a confirmational as well as a narrative use. We then describe the prosodic characteristics of *ha* in Section 4. We first establish that there is a clear difference between the confirmational use of *ha* (with two phonetic forms namely *ha*₁ and *ha*₂) and the narrative use of *ha* (*ha*₃). In Section 5, we focus on the distinctions between the two confirmational uses and we show that they differ in what they ask to confirm: *ha*₁ asks for confirmation of the propositional content (henceforth *p*) of the sentence or the (S)peaker’s stance on *p*, while *ha*₂ asks for confirmation that the (A)ddressee knows *p*. In Section 6, we develop an analysis accounting for the observed sensitivity to clause types. In Section 7, we show that the confirmational *ha* derives complex speech acts. In this respect, *ha*₁ patterns with other confirmational (*ba* and A-not-A tags). The difference between these confirmational has to do with the strength of S’s stance toward *p* (how committed S is toward *p*). This has a predictable effect on the perceived politeness of requests for confirmation. In Section 8, we conclude.

2. Methodology

The data that serve as the empirical basis for this paper come from two sources: corpus search and surveys of native speaker judgments. For the corpus searches, data were extracted from TV series (henceforth marked as TVS), talk shows (TKS) and lectures (LCT). The TV series is ‘*Bianjibu de Gushi*’ (*Stories in the Editorial Office*) aired in 1991, and featured mainly dialogs in Beijing Dialect. The talk show is entitled ‘*Guoxue Tang*’ (*Forum on Sinology*) and aired in 2012; in it, Northern Mandarin takes priority. The lecture is ‘*Liu Xinwu Jiemi Honglougongmeng 1-4*’ (*Liu Xinwu Exposes the Secrets of ‘Dream of the Red Chamber’*) from the program ‘*Baijia Jiangtan*’ (*Lecture Room*) hosted by China Central Television. In addition, we conducted a survey among 44 native Northern Mandarin speakers. Participants were asked to judge the well-formedness of utterances in context. A recording of these sentences was played for the consultants along with a story board which sets up the context (see Burton and Matthewson, 2015 for the story-board elicitation methodology). In the present paper, sentences that have been judged as ill-formed by the majority of the participants are marked with an asterisk (*).

3. Confirmational *ha* vs. narrative *ha*

Ha in NM is used as a *confirmational* (in the sense of Wiltschko and Heim, 2016) as well as a *narrative* particle (He, 1994; Yin, 1999; Yuan, 2008; Su, 2008; Cui, 2009, 2011). As a confirmational, it occurs at the end of a turn and is used to request confirmation that the proposition denoted in the host clause is true. Hence, *ha* in (2) has the same pragmatic function as the A-Not-A tags shown in (3).

(2) *Nimen shi jiu dianzhong kai men de ha?*
 you:PL be nine o’clock open door NOM PRT
 ‘You opened at nine o’clock, right?’

(3) A-Not-A tag questions
Nimen shi jiu dianzhong kai men de, dui bu dui?
 you: PL be nine o’clock open door NOM right not right
 ‘You opened at nine o’clock, right?’

(Li and Thompson, 1981:546)

¹ *Ha* is also found in Southwestern Mandarin, such as in Lichuan dialect in Hubei (He, 2009) and some Sichuan dialects (Lai, 2006; Jiang, 2009; Wang, 2011) but it is used much more frequently in the Northern regions. The etymology of *ha* remains unclear. Sentence final *ha* was not found before Old Mandarin (12th–14th century). It may originate from the final particle *he* (呵) (Liu, 2010) or it might be grammaticalized from the adjective *hao* (好) ‘good’ (Ma and Zhuang, 2014).

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